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WSJ

A Return to the Conservation Ethic

The interior secretary wants to restore the vision of Gifford Pinchot and use public lands ‘for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.’

By Kimberley A. Strassel • Sept. 29, 2017 6:24 p.m. ET

Washington

Amid legislative failure and [Twitter](#) tumult, President Trump’s supporters could be forgiven for thinking he’s failed to fulfill his promise of bringing radical change to Washington. But he also appointed a cabinet full of reform-minded conservatives. Ryan Zinke, the former Montana congressman who was confirmed as interior secretary in March, is getting high marks for the speed and scope of his overhaul.

“My first goal is to restore trust with America that we are in fact using our public lands ‘for the benefit and the enjoyment of the people’—not for the very few and the elite,” he told me Monday, using language from the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act of 1872. The Interior Department oversees 500 million acres nationwide—more than one-fifth of the country’s land area—mostly in the West. “We are going to be great stewards of these treasures,” Mr.

Zinke says, “but we are also going to restore access to the people and to industry—and be a partner.”

The Interior Department has positioned itself at the forefront of Mr. Trump’s energy revival. It is eliminating or preparing to reverse more than 150 Obama regulations, including those curtailing coal mining and hydraulic fracturing, better known as fracking. It has reopened Alaska’s Cook Inlet for business, made 76 million acres in the Gulf of Mexico available for offshore oil-and-gas exploration, and turbocharged pipeline permitting.

On Mr. Trump’s order, the department has reviewed 27 national monuments, which by virtue of that designation can be off-limits to development and to activities such as hunting and fishing. Mr. Zinke has recommended shrinking at least four of them, in line with the Antiquities Act of 1906, which limits the designations to federal land and to the smallest area necessary to protect an actual historical or scientific object.



Illustration: Ken Fallin

“I’m grateful the president had the courage to ask the question,” Mr. Zinke says. His review found past administrations had scooped up private land and relied on bogus historical “objects”—in one case, a World War II-era test bombing crater—to justify new designations. “The Antiquities Act has been used not to protect, but to prevent public access and to prevent public use,” Mr. Zinke says. “To make it hard on local cattlemen, who could no longer use machinery to scoop out a pond, or on cross-country skiers, who can’t have trails groomed.”



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Mr. Zinke's office in Washington is a testament to his own lifelong love of the outdoors. In one corner looms a massive stuffed grizzly bear. Two heads, a buffalo and an elk, are mounted over the fireplace. Cowboy hats litter the place, and a sign behind his desk reads: "Yep." Mr. Zinke arrived for his first day on horseback, instituted a bring-your-dog-to-work day, installed the arcade game Big Buck Hunter in the cafeteria, and even personally shoveled snow at the Lincoln Memorial. But he spends much of his time on the road, exploring federal lands on horseback, in planes and on plows. "As Interior Secretary Swaggers Through Parks, His Staff Rolls Back Regulations," the [New York Times](#) sniffed in a recent headline.

When Mr. Zinke talks policy, he strikes a distinctly populist tone. On his first day in office, he reversed the Obama administration's last-minute ban on using lead ammunition and fishing tackle on federal lands, an edict he saw as an assault on hunters and anglers of ordinary means, who rely on affordable gear.

“This was, again, part of a goal to make hunting and fishing elite, an experience only for the person who can pay for a guide or go a whole week,” Mr. Zinke says. “But it means you limit grandpa, you limit the disabled veteran, you limit the family that goes out for a day to enjoy our public lands.”

Similarly, he sees energy development as a basic way for public lands to benefit the nation. “I never want our children to have to fight overseas for a commodity that we have here,” he says, “especially knowing that we have an energy industry that is the world standard for safety and environmental regulations.” Cheap American energy, he adds, is crucial to lowering U.S. manufacturing costs and boosting workers’ wages.

“Access to our public lands has been limited for industry, even in areas where it is absolutely appropriate,” Mr. Zinke says. “It’s called the National Petroleum Reserve for a reason.” The reference is to the 23 million acres in Alaska that Interior is investigating reopening for drilling after Obama-era restrictions. The department is also working on a new five-year plan for oil-and-gas development in the Outer Continental Shelf, 94% of which is currently off-limits to energy producers. It is issuing coal leases in Wyoming and Utah and streamlining approvals for the construction of the Berwind coal mine on the Virginia-West Virginia border.

“Our regulatory scheme has to be one that holds industry accountable, but that isn’t arbitrary,” Mr. Zinke says. In the past, “not only has our federal government been arbitrary, it has been punitive.” He cites the example of Shell, which spent \$10 billion on an Arctic drilling plan “only to be forced into a regulatory box that almost guarantees failure.” Mr. Zinke is unequivocal: “That’s wrong.” His department is trying to prove its good faith by clearing backlogged permit applications and streamlining future projects. Mr. Zinke is also implementing a strictly market-based approach to energy plays, rather than subsidizing costly renewables. “We are for all-of-the-above energy, but the energy itself has to be competitive,” he says. “It isn’t Interior’s role to pick and choose winners.”

All this will generate more revenue that the federal government can use to preserve national treasures for future generations. The Obama administration's crackdown on energy leases slowed royalties and left the Interior Department with an \$11.5 billion infrastructure backlog in the national parks alone. In 2008, Mr. Zinke says, the department pulled in \$18 billion in offshore revenue. Last year Interior's offshore revenues were only \$2.6 billion. Even with the drop in oil prices, Mr. Zinke estimates that had drilling continued apace, Interior would have no maintenance backlog today and would instead be making capital investments of \$3 billion to \$4 billion a year.

Under Mr. Zinke's leadership, the department has already held more onshore lease sales in six months than in all of last year. From January to June of 2016, Interior generated just \$11.5 million from onshore oil and gas. For the same period this year, the figure is \$146 million. And Mr. Zinke insists he drives a hard bargain. "We have a royalty committee that we established to make sure the American public is getting value," he says. "If you are doing commercial work on our public lands, the No. 1 stakeholder is the American public, and they need a fair return."

Mr. Zinke says his longer-term goal is to make his department a better steward. He brings up President Theodore Roosevelt's famous 1903 camping trip to Yosemite National Park with the preservationist John Muir: "They went out on this wonderful ride, a ride that you could not even replicate today because of the dead and dying trees." Mr. Zinke has ordered all his agencies to put a priority on active management against wildfires. "We are spending \$2 billion a year fighting fires, money that could be going to far better conservation efforts," he says, visibly annoyed.

Such mismanagement is what drives Western frustration, which threatens to become a new Sagebrush Rebellion. "Some of the anger is that our grand bargains have been broken, and those bargains said that you had wilderness, but you also have grazing; you could also hunt and fish," Mr. Zinke says. Now Westerners "watch these catastrophic fires, and they've lost any faith that the

federal government is capable of being a good steward.”

Mr. Zinke believes the only way for Interior to improve its performance is through a radical overhaul. He plans to devolve far more authority and resources to front-line park and land managers, allowing them to make decisions more quickly and efficiently. “You end up with a park superintendent of 47 years who apparently can’t be trusted with making the grand decision of whether and when locals can collect fiddleheads,” a type of fern, he says. “They’re spending more time behind a desk, less in the field, and they are getting micromanaged.”

The federal bureaucracy also makes it hard for on-site staff to work with state authorities, Indian tribes, and private landowners on solutions that take account of local needs. Mr. Zinke is thinking about moving the headquarters of the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Reclamation to somewhere out West, perhaps Colorado. “I’m a military guy, so I’m all about putting your assets closer to the fight,” he says with a laugh.

Mr. Zinke’s ambitions extend to the daunting challenge of reforming the way the entire federal government manages its property. “We’ve got to start looking at our lands in terms of complete watersheds and ecosystems, rather than isolated assets,” he says. “We need to think about wildlife corridors, because it turns out wildlife doesn’t just stay on federal lands.”

Even when it does, there often are overlapping jurisdictions. The management of a single stream may involve endangered salmon (overseen by the National Marine Fisheries Service), trout (Interior’s Fish and Wildlife Service), a dam (the Army Corps of Engineers), irrigation (Interior’s Bureau of Reclamation), and a nearby forest (the Agriculture Department’s Forest Service). “We can have, and frequently do have, multiple biological opinions that are irreconcilable,” Mr. Zinke says. “That’s us mismanaging our core mission.”

One of Mr. Zinke’s first trips as secretary was to Yellowstone National Park. His first stop was the Roosevelt Arch, whose cornerstone was laid by Theodore

Roosevelt in 1903. It is inscribed with that phrase from the law that created the park: “For the Benefit and Enjoyment of the People.”

As a vision, that’s pure Gifford Pinchot, who became the first chief of the U.S. Forest Service in 1905, during TR’s presidency. Pinchot was a founder of the conservationist movement, an ardent believer in market forces, and an aggressive proponent of controlled but profitable use of natural resources for the benefit of citizens. Today’s environmental movement—which measures the success of government land management by the number of acres locked away from public use—has largely excised Pinchot from history in favor of Muir.

“But here’s the difference,” says Mr. Zinke. “TR went on a nice ride with Muir. He hired Pinchot. And that’s because Pinchot advocated using science and best practices for management.”

The conservation ethic is where the similarity with Mr. Zinke ends. Pinchot was a scion of a wealthy East Coast family, a Yale Skull and Bones man. Mr. Zinke is all blue-collar Montana—the son of a plumber, an Eagle Scout, a college football player, a geologist, and the first Navy SEAL elected to Congress. His broader political outlook is more libertarian than that of the progressive Pinchot. “I’ve only ever thought there are two things our government should fund absolutely: our military and our parks system,” Mr. Zinke says with a laugh. “The rest is up for discussion.”

Ms. Strassel writes the Journal’s Potomac Watch column.

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